The Federal Brain Drain

*Impacts on Science Capacity, 2016–2020*

Appendix: Methodology

www.ucsusa.org/resources/federal-brain-drain

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**Data Collection**

We began the project by identifying science-based agencies that would likely employ staff with scientific and/or specialized technical expertise. From a search for these types of agencies, we identified and compiled a list of 26 federal government agencies that fit these criteria. We then requested from these agencies—via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)—total staff records and attrition, by fiscal year and quarter, job series, position title, federal grade or level, appointment type, and programmatic or regional office. Many of these FOIA requests have not yet been completed; we intend to update these analyses as new data are received. Raw data received on staff numbers and attrition are available upon request.

The results we have received vary, depending on agency records and processes. Some agencies narrowed the date range of our search (e.g., EPA); expedited the process by omitting FOIA-exempt job series, like police officers (e.g., NASA); or sent us data organized by pay period instead of quarter (USGS). These variations mean that, for each agency, our data analyses differed slightly.

Once we received total staffing data, we identified individuals considered to be “scientific experts” from the full agency staffing lists we received. To do so, we used the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Handbook of Occupational Groups and Series. We considered positions to be “scientific” if they belonged to a job series that involves some scientific training or expertise, including but not limited to research, operations, modeling, inspection and oversight, and science policy. The OPM series have an affiliated four-digit OPM series code and series name (e.g., John Doe, a chemist, belongs to OPM Series 1320: Chemistry Series) that allowed us to assign a corresponding series to each staff listing (see here for an example). We identified 197 series from the OPM handbook that we thought could include “scientific experts” (see table at end).

**Data Analyses**

The data we received were organized either by fiscal year (FY) and either FY quarter or, in the case of EPA and USGS, federal pay period. We consolidated these data, which were usually spread across worksheets, and then used formulas in Excel to filter out those staff entries that met our definition of “scientific experts.” These filtered data were the core of our analyses (see table for a sample).
Sample of Staffing Data Received

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Data sample from BOEM records received from our FOIA request (several columns omitted for concision). Headers in blue indicate raw data we received; headers in orange indicate our added formulas and filters. Note the OPM occupational series title in column Q, the OPM occupation series code in column R, and our scientist/non-scientist filter in column S.

We were able to calculate quarterly averages for most agencies, but not all: The data received from USGS and FWS, for example, included one pay period of each FY quarter only. As a result, these pay periods were deemed representative of each FY quarter for these agencies. Additionally, we have not yet received data from some quarters. For FWS, we have only received data for the first quarter of 2018 so far; thus, the “average” reflects only the first quarter (but will be updated as new data are received).

We used pivot tables to analyze trends in staffing by FYs and quarters, job grades, OPM job series, agency office, and other metrics. To generate annual averages, the four quarters of each FY were averaged, and the resulting numbers were used to calculate both change in raw numbers and percent change from 2016 to 2020—for example, the percent change, from 2016 to 2020, of the number of EPA scientists in each regional office (2016 annual average subtracted from the 2020 annual average, then divided by the 2016 annual average). To compare staffing across agencies, we calculated percent change between 2016 and each consecutive year.

**Taryn MacKinney** is an investigative researcher in the Center for Science and Democracy at UCS. **Jacob Carter** is a research scientist in the Center. **Gretchen Goldman** is the research director in the Center.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We thank Dr. Christopher Sellers, whose advice and sample FOIA requests proved instrumental for our work. Dr. Sellers requested similar records for a Environmental Governance and Date Initiative report, published May 2020.
White-Collar OPM Jobs that Employ Scientific Experts

*Note: We considered positions “scientific” if they belonged to a job series that involves some scientific training or expertise, including but not limited to research, operations, modeling, inspection and oversight, and science policy. Blue-collar OPM jobs have been omitted.*

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